

A sepia-toned photograph of a deep canyon. A river flows through the bottom left, surrounded by steep, rocky cliffs. A railway track runs along the right side of the canyon, with a small building visible on the right. The background shows more distant mountains.

50a

Coast to Coast

A Scenic rail adventure from
Christchurch to Greymouth through
the Giant's Backyard of the
Southern Alps.



"A Land of Contrasts"

THE ALPINE ROUTE OF THE PIONEERS

The Midland line . . . the railway between Canterbury and Westland, through the rugged heart of the Southern Alps . . . is rich in New Zealand pioneering history.

Explorers and gold prospectors trekked the route of today's Midland railway in the 1800's, long before the first rails were laid. They took days, sometimes weeks to reach the canyons and granite-walled gorges of the Alps . . . spent months away from friends and families in the settlements . . . often carrying their precious discoveries, in gold-filled pouches and memory-filled minds, back to those who waited long after all hope of their survival had been abandoned.

As Canterbury and Westland grew, regular travel between the communities on each side of the Alps became a necessity. A coach route, following rough pioneer foot-tracks across Arthur's Pass became the main highway . . . the horse-drawn journey took days, crossing the mountain pass and fording unpredictable rivers, subject to frequent flooding and ice-falls. Overnight resting-places along the way often provided emergency survival accommodation for weather-bound travellers.

Rails had reached Cass by the turn of the century, and the arduous coach trip was shortened to a two-day trek linking Cass with Otira. Motor transport cut the journey to an overnight trip in subsequent years, and the completion of the famous Otira rail tunnel in 1923 opened up Westland for development, reducing the time for the journey between Christchurch and Greymouth to a few hours.

Today, the rail route between Canterbury and Westland offers an unparalleled spectacle of contrast, and a glimpse of the conditions our pioneers faced in the days when New Zealand was still largely un-mapped. It is a not-to-be-missed Alpine rail-travel experience.

In less than five hours, by rail, you can follow the path of the pioneers . . . travelling from the English countryside of the rolling Canterbury Plains through the ice-capped splendour of the Southern Alps to the rain-forests and lush green bush of the West Coast.

ACROSS THE PLAINS TO SPRINGFIELD — A QUIET INTRODUCTION TO ADVENTURE

Drawn up at a Christchurch Railways Station platform, standing quietly amidst the mid-morning bustle of passengers and luggage, the coaches of the Greymouth train show few outward signs of wear from the journey for which they are now veterans . . . the coast-to-coast trek from rolling plains through mountain passes to Westland and back. Inside, a carpeted floor welcomes the traveller to reclining, well-padded seats which offer comfort and quiet relaxation for the four-hour, fifty-five minute journey.

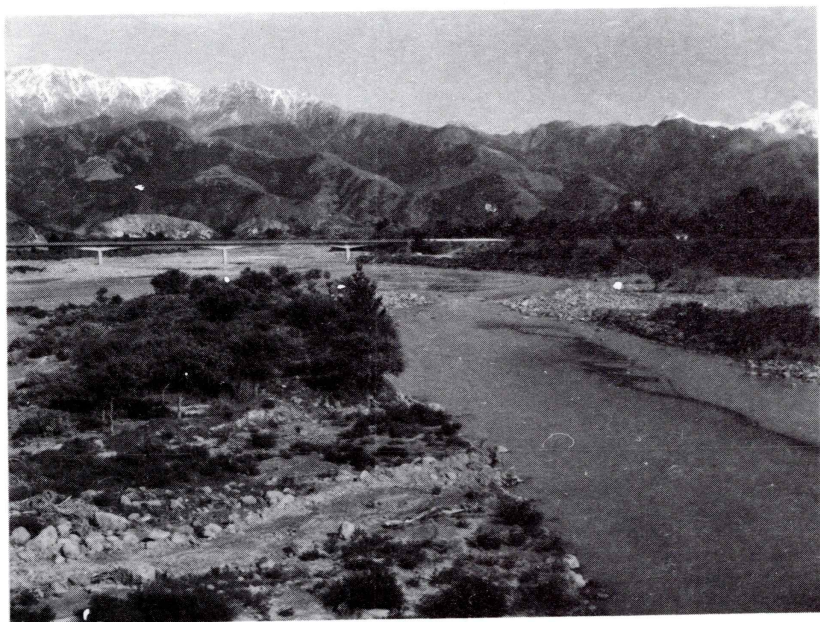


The Express at Christchurch Station

Rolling smoothly away from the platform and out through the railyards at 9.40, your train gathers speed past cement works and sawmills, through Addington and part of the industrial heart of Christchurch to Hornby. A momentary stop to pick up passengers, and then open country, flat plains lead to Rolleston, as the back-yards of neat outer-suburb houses flick past the coach windows.

A small dog dashes up to the yard fence bordering the railway line, ears flapping, loudly barking his daily, unanswered challenge to the train.

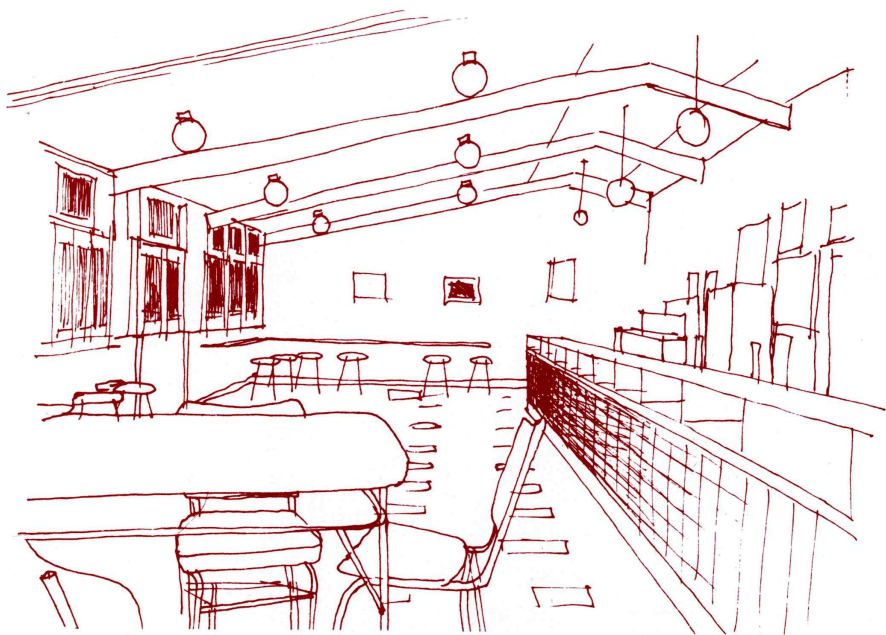
In the distance, the snow-covered peaks of the Alps reach into infinity, the stark vastness coming closer with every kilometre across the rolling plains. Darfield, then Sheffield, stand lonely out-posts in the very English countryside, as the Canterbury plains begin to give way to rising, rockier ground — and Big Kowai, the first of five viaducts on the route, echoes under carriage wheels.



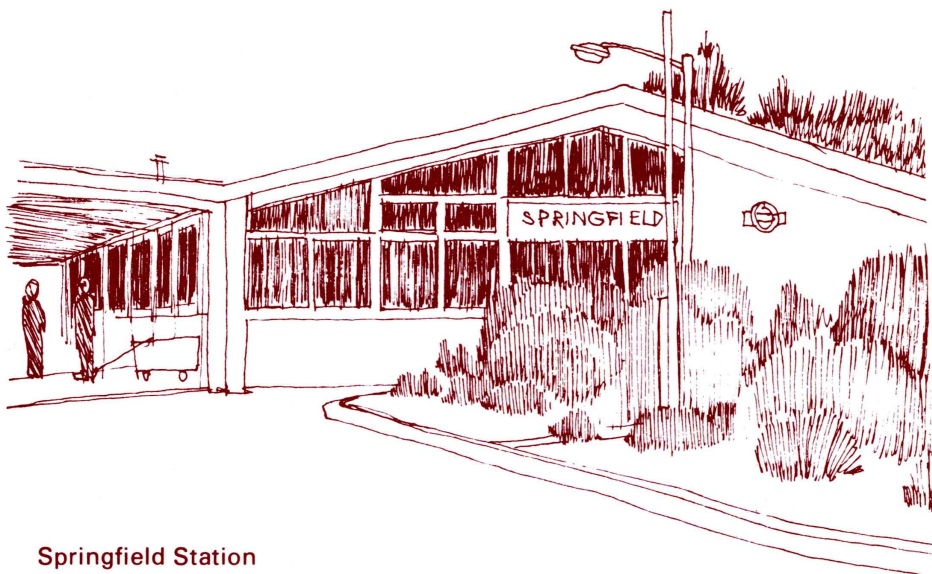
'Big Kowai' Viaduct

Standing 22 metres above the Kowai River, 73 kilometres west of Christchurch, the Big Kowai stretches 205 metres from bank to bank. Eight reinforced concrete octagonal piles, driven up to 10 metres deep into the river bed, support reinforced concrete piers which, in turn, support nine plate-girder spans, containing a total weight of 275 tonnes of steel. The Big Kowai was built in 1962 alongside the wrought-iron Kowai viaduct, which it replaced. The old viaduct had spanned the river since the turn of the century.

Two hours after leaving Christchurch, it is time for refreshments at Springfield . . . a friendly station refreshment room, with smiling service. It's just after eleven . . . the cold breath of the nearby mountain ranges can be felt, as a cup of tea and sandwiches provide a welcome snack. Wise travellers stock up with canned drinks and edibles here . . . the next refreshment stop is at Otira, two hours away . . . and there's some hard climbing ahead, through the 'Giant's Backyard' to Arthur's Pass and Otira.



Springfield refreshment rooms



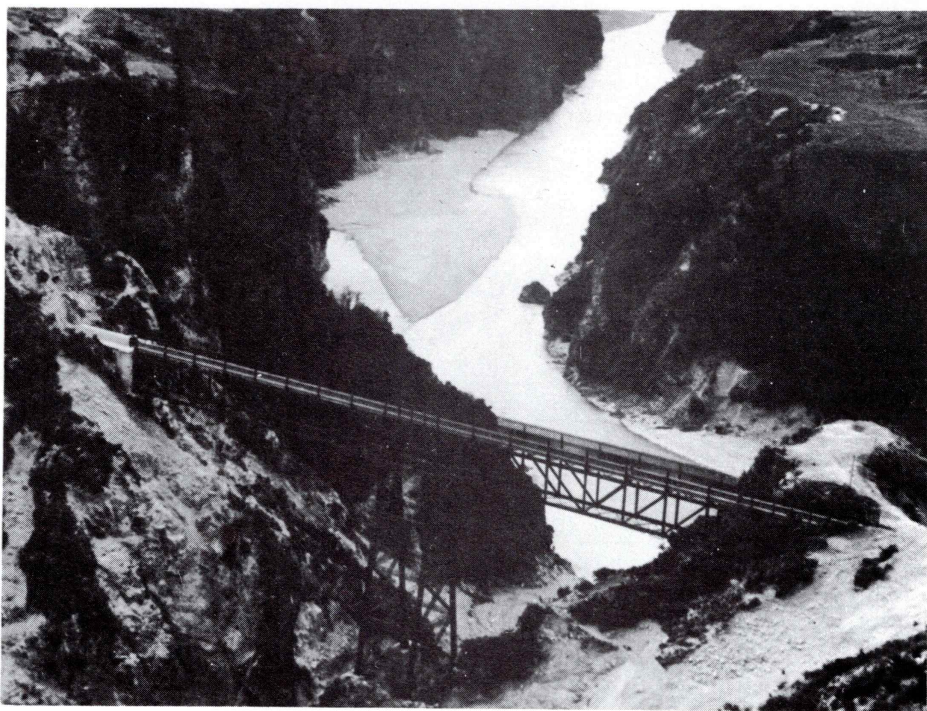
Springfield Station

ENTER THE 'GIANT'S BACKYARD'

Climbing away from Springfield, you enter mountain country . . . the last-completed, and one of the toughest sections of the line. The track clings to the rocky face of a hillside cutting as the carriage lights flick on . . . a sure sign of tunnels ahead. The locomotive's exhaust note, filtering back from the rock walls, suddenly develops a deeper sound . . . the first of 19 tunnels, a short hillside cavern through a craggy spur, leads you across a spidery network of five four-legged trestles, set against the background of snow-capped high country. Patterson's Creek viaduct . . . since 1903, it has spanned 175 metres across a 36 metre deep gulch just six kilometres west of the Big Kowai . . . at the start of the snowy Alps foothills.

Still climbing, two more longer tunnels conceal the craggy alpine outline from view, until suddenly a stretch of open track reveals the Waimakariri gorge, precipitating to a ribbon-like river, far below . . . just before the maw of another tunnel engulfs your train.

A long stretch of open track follows, through low hills covered with short yellow tussock — a lone hawk, hunting, drifts almost motionless on the air currents high above the valley floor, level with carriage windows. Your train eases around the cliff face. Another short tunnel, an aperture in the rock, then the silver ribbon of river winding through the valley floor, far below, gives a new perspective on your height, as the train winds through a shingle cutting and another tunnel to dip downhill, a sudden grade, then slowly halts at Staircase. Here, the crew change over for their return to Christchurch aboard the goods train waiting in the crossing loop. The goods train crew take charge of your passenger service.

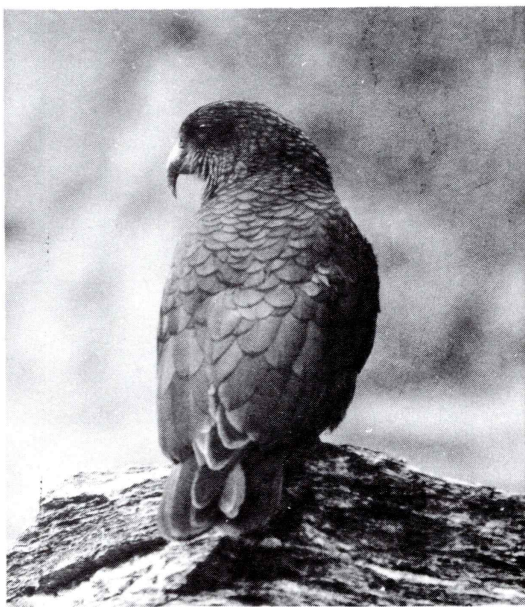


Staircase Viaduct

Climbing from Staircase, a short tunnel opens out to the giant cleft of the gorge again . . . here, the track spans 146 metres across the Staircase viaduct, a cliff-hanger, standing on its 70 metre single central pier like a letter 'T' etched against the rock cliffs.

Opened with the line in 1906, the four spans of the Staircase viaduct contain a total of 440 tonnes of steel, and the viaduct (like others on the line) features a fully fenced rail deck, to give trains added safety in the wind-swept gorge.

In this mountainous heart of the South Island, as the rhythmic bellow of the diesel locomotive echoes back from granite walls, you can imagine summers spent hunting Thar and Chamois, foot-slogging over similar icy peaks, high above the headwaters of the Clyde River in the backblocks of Erewhon, not many miles from the railway winding around canyon walls. The air in this high country has a bite, so thin and sharp it makes your head spin, and the sound of Keas calling as they hop through wind-blown tussock has crystal clarity.



Kea - a native of New Zealand's high country

Just after crossing Staircase viaduct a longer tunnel leads to a short descent around the slab-sided walls of the gorge to the next tunnel — a minute or two of rushing sound — then a brief interlude of daylight before the dark walls of yet another tunnel bring the bustling sounds of locomotive and carriage wheels echoing through the brightly lit coach once more.

After leaving the tunnel, the locomotive comes into view through carriage windows, almost at right angles to your train as the track curves to cross the wintry Broken River chasm, on the 55 metre high Broken River viaduct. Six concrete monoliths support the 134 metres of fenced track across the nine spans of the viaduct, standing since 1906.



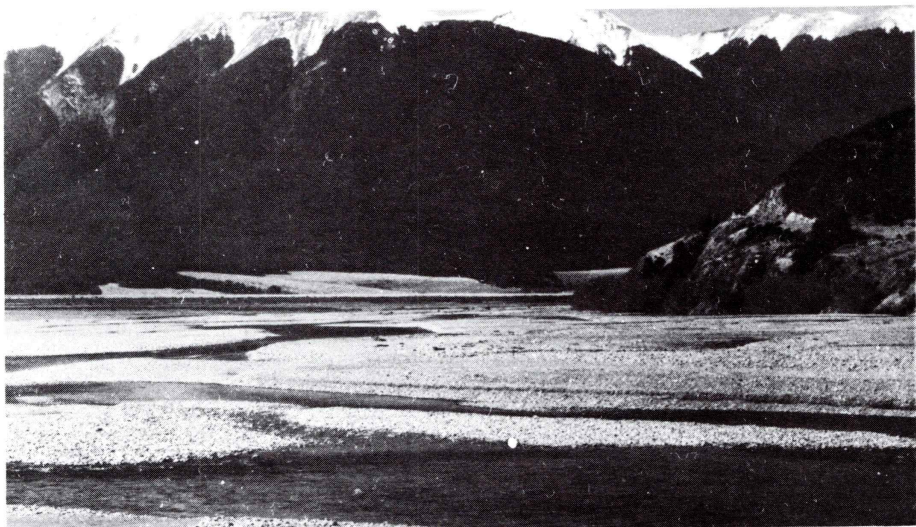
Broken River Viaduct

Ahead, less than 2 kilometres away, the outline of Slovens Creek viaduct can be seen, also fenced against the wind, sturdy on its triple four-legged trestle-type piers. The train winds around gorge walls towards the 166 metre viaduct standing, it appears, across your path. Opened in 1910, Slovens Creek viaduct spans the icy mountain stream of the same name, 39 metres below the rail deck.

Looking back as you cross Slovens Creek, the outline of the just-crossed Broken River viaduct can be seen, etched against the granite walls of the gorge, brown and grey in the afternoon sun as your train climbs through the first of several gaunt rock cuttings to another dark opening through the rock, a tunnel opening out to a gorge as the track curves around craggy granite walls above the grey-green river swirling far below . . . an awesome sight.

A series of five tunnels, varying in length, leads through rock and sandstone cliffs to a short bridge across a rocky cleft, and now you descend through sparsely-bushed countryside past sombre cliffs to the valley floor . . . a land of brown hills and shallow swamps, with Noman's Hill standing forlorn and forbidding to your left.

Your train rolls more swiftly along the flat valley floor, crossing five short bridges across rivulets and creeks in as many minutes. Eroded foothills loom on either side of the wide valley, as though a giant hand had scooped alluvial soil, silt and boulders in a massive movement towards the West Coast, piling the spoil haphazardly and forgetting to come back and clean up.



Across the wide valley floor.

GREYMOUTH

STILLWATER

Moana

Poerua

Inchbonnie

Jackson

Aickens

OTIRA

Otira Tunnel

ARTHUR'S PASS

Cora Lynn

Cass

Craigieburn

Avoca

Staircase

SPRINGFIELD

Annat

Sheffield

DARFIELD



Otira Station



Gold prospectors

Kirwee

Rolleston

CHRISTCHURCH

A NEW WORLD OF CONTRAST



A chalet-like shelter

Nearing Craigieburn, a tiny pitched-roof, cedar-wood shelter stands like a gnome's refuge at the side of the track, its chalet-like design harmonising perfectly with the icy surroundings. Now, the white-topped splendour of the hills far across the valley reflects the mountain sunlight as you pass a wide lake, dark green and still in the afternoon sun, and approach Cass.

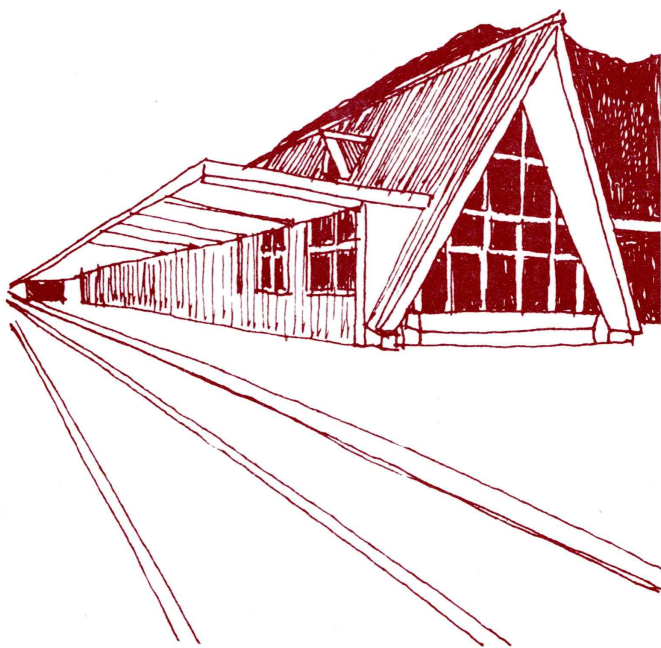
The railway ended at Cass, in the early 1900's, when travellers to and from the West Coast had to take the tortuous Arthur's Pass route through the icy summits of the Alps. West Coasters still remember that trip . . . a lady passenger vividly recalls her childhood treks.

"Six-horse teams they had, on the coach over Arthur's Pass. One of the rules was, men walk — women and children ride. But when the steep parts of the Pass, or the snow and ice got too much for the horses, we all got out and pushed. Somehow, we made it every time."

Looking up at the distant peaks of the Pass from the comfortable heated interior of your carriage, it's hard to imagine the rigours of the pioneer coach trips, as Cass — the turn-of-the-century rail/coach terminal for the West Coast, slips silently into the background . . . its frontier days now faded into history.

The busy diesel locomotive hauls your train further up the valley, past the remains of old tank locomotives, red with rust, half-buried in the shingle at the trackside. Relics of the age of steam, they continue to serve the railway providing bulwarks against the erosion of the valley walls.

In the distance, at the western end of the valley, a tiny group of buildings can be seen . . . the only sign of habitation in the vast expanse of shingle flats, swift mountain streams and forest. Standing on the hillside, the buildings appear to be a holiday camp or some other remote outpost . . . an intrusion into the almost perfect solitude of the region.

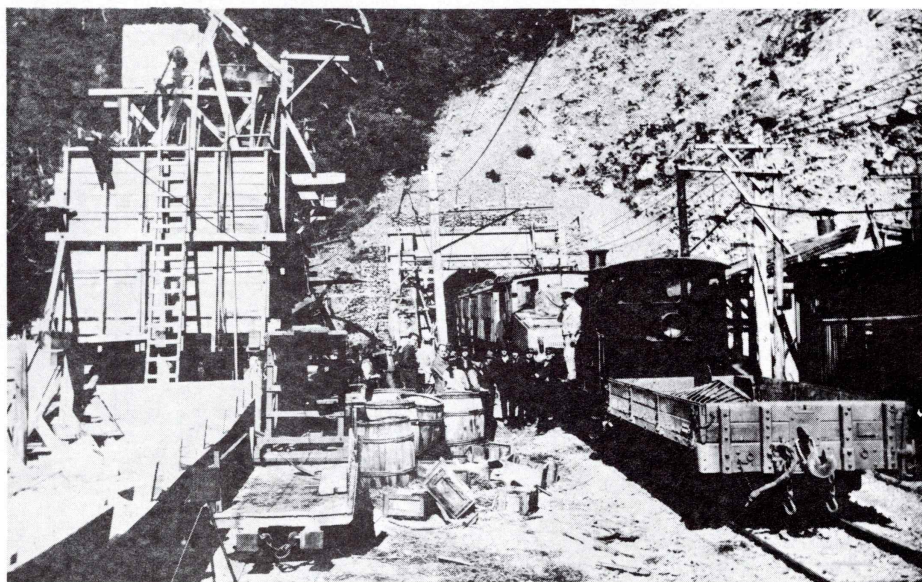


Arthur's Pass Station - an ideal design for the mountain setting

A low, hollow-clattering bridge takes you closer to the tiny settlement nestling on the tree-clad slopes, as you cross the top end of the valley and pass heavily-bushed beech forests, across Rough Creek and past more holiday cottages, closer this time, towards Arthur's Pass. Two old railway carriages, fitted out as holiday homes, stand out at the trackside as your train slows to approach Arthur's Pass station.

The chalet-style station building, an ideal design for this mountain setting, slowly merges with the background as you cross a short bridge at the outskirts of the station. The rock walls of the surrounding canyon suddenly narrow towards the open mouth of the Otira tunnel.

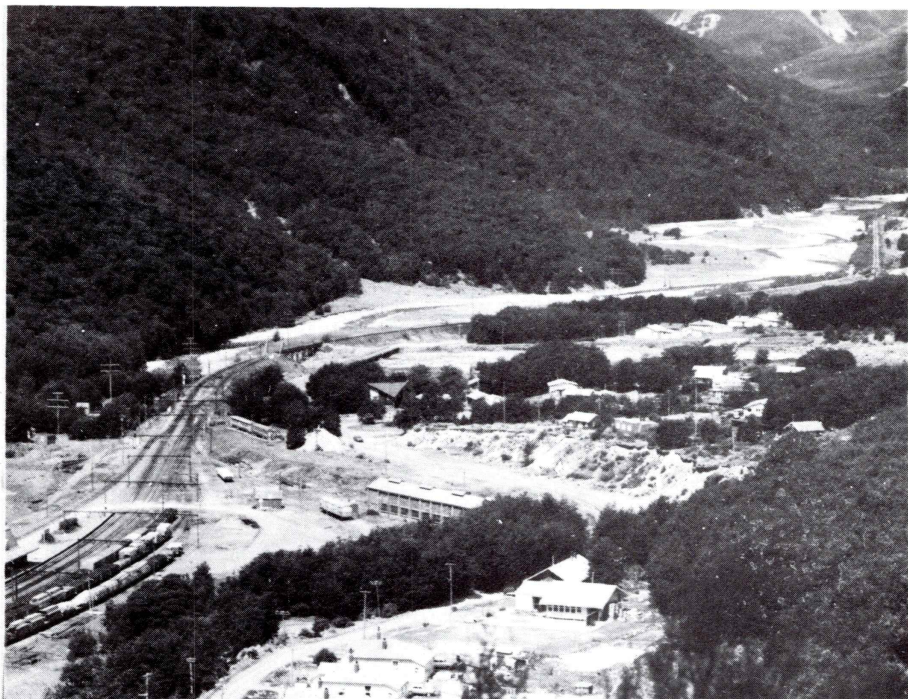
OTIRA — GATEWAY TO WESTLAND



Tunnelling through the Alps - Otira, 1908

Started in 1908, the Otira tunnel was the largest project of its kind anywhere in New Zealand and Australia, in those years. Crumbling rock and frequent flooding made tunnelling difficult, almost impossible at times, as the tunnellers made their initial assault on the Alps.

Crews worked short-handed, never more than half-manned during the 1914-18 war period, yet the tunnel holed-through in July 1918, and five years later, on 4 August 1923 the completed Otira tunnel was officially opened for rail traffic by the Prime Minister of the time, Mr W F Massey. A new era of trade opened up for the West Coast . . . the isolated years had ended.



"Gateway to the West Coast" - Otira Station

As you enter the 8½ kilometre tunnel through the Alps, a new sound enters the carriage . . . a rushing, sighing, hollow sound, as through the earth beneath the mountains is opening up before the rumbling locomotive. A rising grade to the centre . . . then a long descent, to daylight and a different world. In mere minutes, you pass through the centre of the Southern Alps to emerge on the West Coast . . . from the granite cliffs and shingle river valleys of the Canterbury foothills, to lush greenery wreathed in rain mist . . . an altogether different countryside and climate.

HISTORY UNFOLDS BEFORE YOUR EYES

After a timely refreshment stop at Otira station, you get underway once more. Dense undergrowth, damp with mist, speeds past the carriage windows as you descend through a jungle of greenery to a river flat. Stony creeks washing under culverts, paddocks of blackface sheep are features of the contrasting landscape. Through Jacksons, with its ancient disused stockyards and the pub on the hillside, straight out of the pages of history. 'Established 1870' proclaims the proudly-painted sign on each end of the colonial structure.



A quiet contrast in scenery

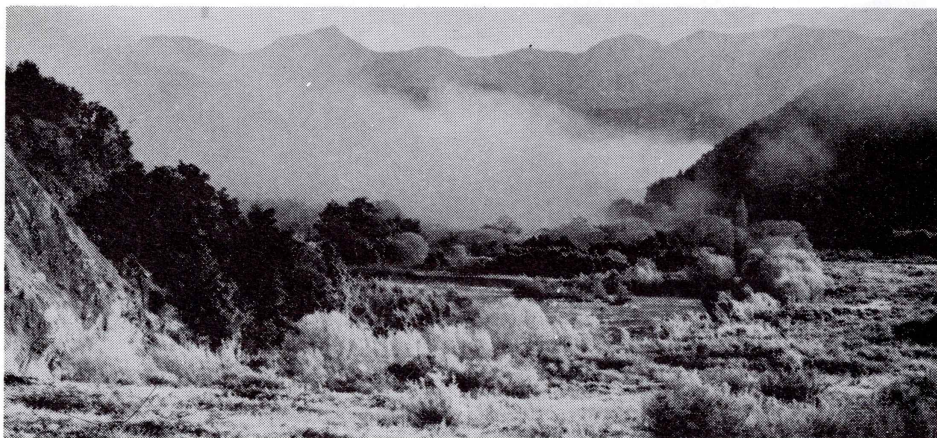
Gorse and broom, bright with yellow flowers, now dominate the scene as low bridges lead across the big Taramakau River and the smaller Orangipuku, to the side of another valley. The magnitude of the scene dwarfs your train.

Inchbonnie is not far away now . . . a series of small hillocks of sawdust and wood shavings appear as your train passes the now-disused sawmills just outside the station and the track turns to the north. Wreaths of mist obscure Lake Brunner on your left, as the track skirts the lakeshore. The countryside is beautiful here, a mixture of cleared farmland, country roads, small lakes and thick bush. Shady inlets, partly hidden by rain mist, are dappled with the wide-circled risings of fish feeding just under the surface. Brief glimpses of Moana, the lakeside settlement, can be caught through the trees — and then suddenly you pass the station.



Lake Brunner

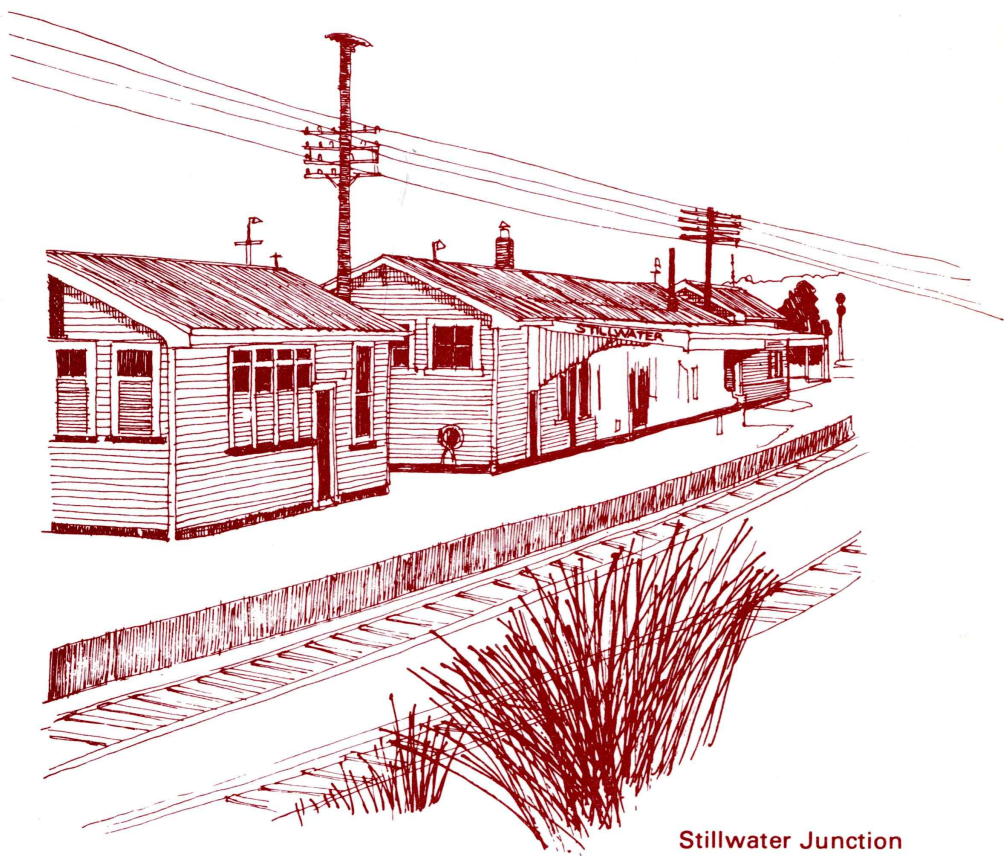
Crossing a small bridge, the idyllic surroundings are lost, momentarily, as you enter a short tunnel which opens out to lush green countryside once more. The track borders the Arnold River and follows its swamp bush fringe to the series of low, tree-clad hills leading to Stillwater Junction. Passengers for Westport change here. A brief stop, time to appreciate the rural setting of the neatly-kept station . . . a more sedate pace of living here . . . and then the journey resumes. Leaving Stillwater behind, crossing a long bridge then two short bridges in quick succession you run parallel to the wide Grey River, through a short tunnel and under a road bridge to travel the river bank again.



"The track borders the Arnold River"

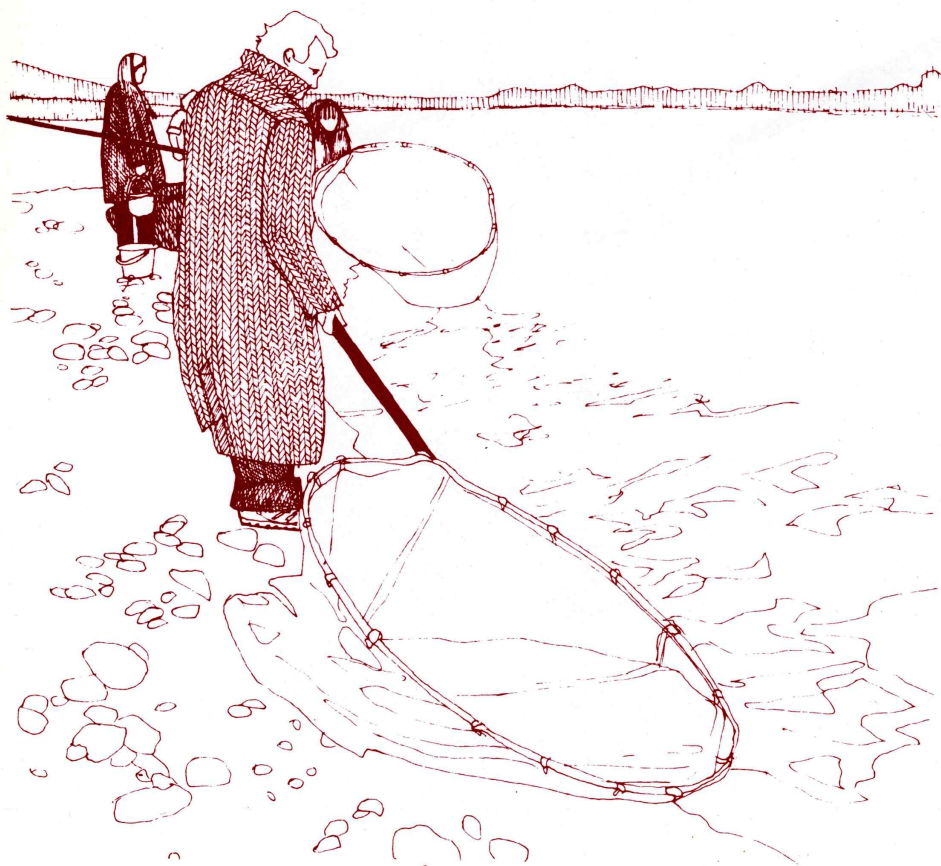
Through Dobson, brightly-painted cottages and punga groves . . . sheep and Pukeko birds mutely watch the passage of your train from fields of stubble dappled with white and grey mounds of spaghnum moss . . . one of today's exports to Japan.

Below, the Brunner suspension road bridge leads across the river to the beehive coke ovens at the site of the famous Brunner coal mines on the opposite bank. The coke ovens were recently unearthed by geologists . . . you can see evidence of further excavations at the site. A memorial to Thomas Brunner, discoverer of coal on the Coast in 1848, stands clearly visible on a small bush-covered islet in the centre of the river.

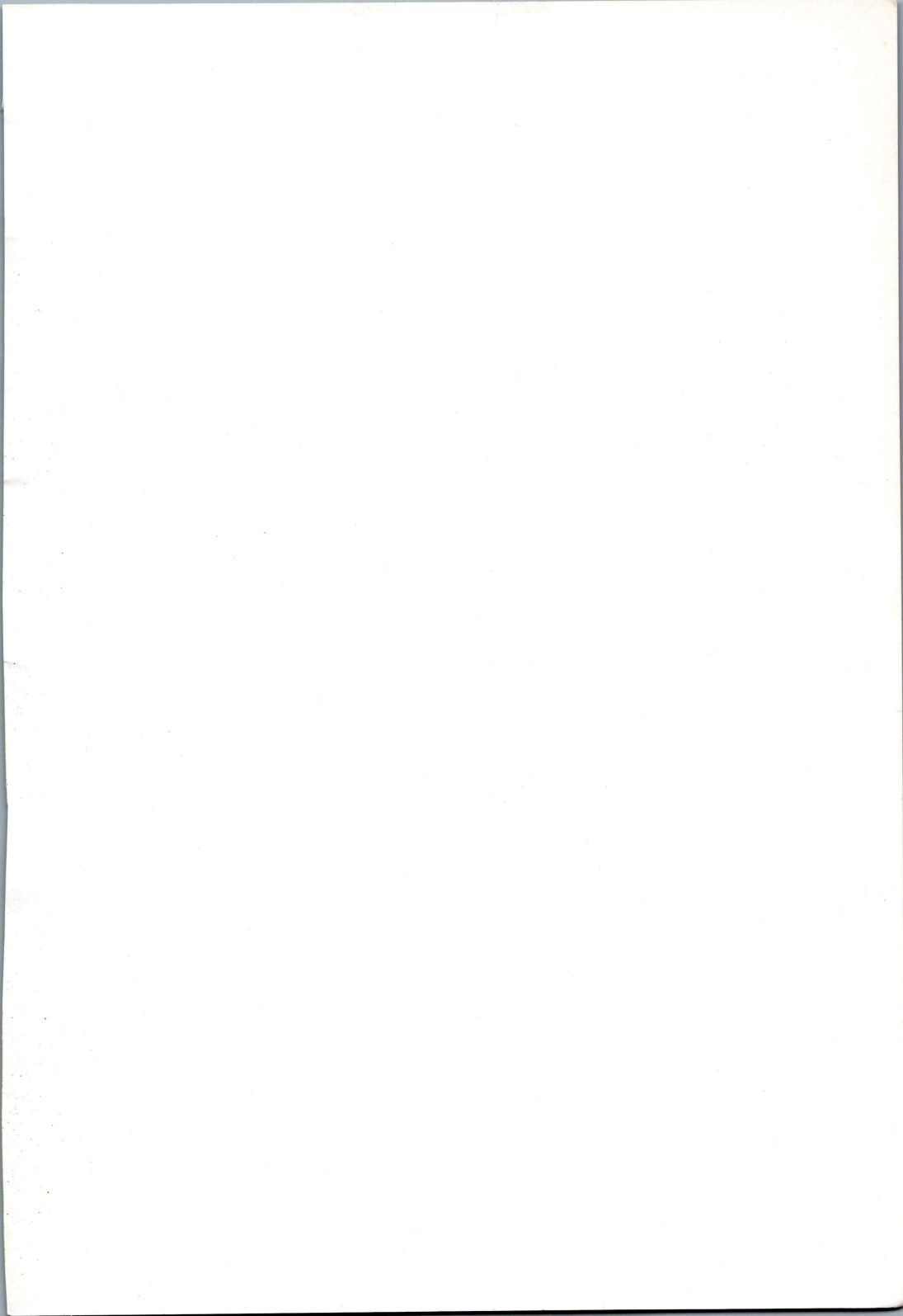


Stillwater Junction

Further along the riverbank, a few hopeful whitebait nets flash in the afternoon sun as you pass Kaiata . . . signalling a welcome to Greymouth, as your train rounds the last corner and arrives at the platform of Greymouth station, almost in the town centre.



Whitebait fishermen





Railways

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